

War of the Seasons

book two

the half-blood

*A SAMPLE OF
THE NOVEL BY
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War of the Seasons, Book Two: The Half-blood

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CHAPTER ONE

NO NEED TO ARGUE

WHAT'S WRONG?" STORY TOOK EIRNIN'S PROFFERED HAND and let him pull her up onto the wooden dock. Though he'd avoided her gaze, she still caught the yellow worry in the elf's eyes. "You've been quiet this whole trip."

"Aye, but I'm always quiet when we travel under the sea." He kept his tone light, but Eirnin's accent—Irish-sounding to Story's ears—rolled out thicker than usual, betraying his agitation. "Unlike you, I can't send my thoughts through water. Besides, you talked enough for both of us." He said the last with a wink that crinkled up the ailach—his clan's tribal tattoo—underneath his left eye.

As soon as Story cleared Ped's back, the selkie leapt out of the water and transformed from his seal form into that of an almost horse-sized, floppy-eared Great Dane. He shook himself dry, spraying Story and Eirnin with cold salt water. Blowing out a breath that fluttered his jowls, the selkie put his long, black nose on Eirnin's tattooed shoulder, begging for his fur to be scratched.

“Not a bit sorry, are you, Ped?” Eirnin obliged him with a quick scratch and gave Story a helpless smile.

Ped whined, and Story laughed, “I don’t think he’ll ever be okay with being number two, after me, in your hierarchy.”

“He’ll get over it.” Eirnin patted the selkie affectionately on the neck, and Ped leaned all his weight against the elf. Like most natives of Ailionora, Eirnin was stronger than a human, which was a good thing, or else he’d have been knocked to the ground while the giant dog tried to show his affection. Sometimes it seemed the selkie didn’t realize how big he was and instead thought he was some sort of lapdog.

The air whistled out of Ped’s nostrils in a high-pitched keen when Eirnin stopped patting his head to reach for a saddlebag holding their gear. The elf’s darkly tanned skin glistened in the hot, summer sun highlighting the swirling, black tattoos stretched over the toned muscles of his left shoulder, biceps, and forearm.

“You still didn’t answer my question.” Story cocked her head to one side, scattering dozens of shoulder-length, purple and black braids behind her. “I know something’s got you worried, or anxious, or whatever feeling it is you’re trying to hide from me.”

Eirnin’s shoulders tensed, but he didn’t turn around. “Sometimes I don’t think it’s fair that only elf eyes change color.” He tossed Story a soft, absorbent cloth to dry her late father’s old Marine Corps Ka-Bar knife. “You can hide your emotions so much easier than we can.”

“I don’t hide my emotions from *you*.” She pulled the knife from her thigh holster and wiped down the blade to prevent corrosion from the salt water. Later, she’d get one of the mages to make sure it was still okay. Metals were rare in this world, making her knife precious in more ways than one.

“Aye, but you don’t hide your emotions from anyone, dear

heart. You're nearly as bad as your sister." He pulled another cloth from the bag and used it to dry his bare arms and broad chest. He didn't bother with his legs as his cutoff leggings would continue to drip water down them until he changed. "But at least her eyes change color."

Story didn't answer and after sheathing her knife stared at him expectantly. A light ocean breeze blew against her olive skin causing goose bumps to rise along the damp surface. She felt a dribble of water run down her back from the soaked knot of cloth at her neck, holding up her brief swimming sarong.

Letting out a quiet sigh, Eirnin finally faced her. "She did it again."

"Adair? What did she do?"

"No, I mean your mother." He hung the towel around his neck. "She asked when the bonding ceremony was going to be."

"What? We're not even engaged yet!" Story crossed her arms over her chest to keep from throwing them up in the air in frustration.

"Aye, dear heart, I know." Eirnin held his hands up in a placating gesture. "But the thing is, Almera's always on my back about it. I don't know why, since dryads don't even believe in bonding."

"Yeah, well, my mom knows that humans do. Believe in getting married, that is." Story tapped her index finger on her biceps, feeling slightly annoyed, and surprisingly, it was more with Eirnin than her mother. "I might be half-dryad physically, but I'm all human in my head. Besides, she knows how seriously elves take relationships." She looked at him pointedly.

"Don't you start on me now, too. I get enough of this from Eáanna as it is." He raked his fingers through his wet, black hair, standing it up in spikes.

"What the heck does the queen have to do with us?" This time Story did throw her hands in the air and small twinges

of her father's thick, Smoky Mountain accent laced her words. "And why is she talking to you about it and not me? For that matter, why doesn't she talk to me about anything, well, anything that isn't superficial, anymore? I swear she's been avoiding me."

"She'd like this business, that is to say *us*, settled." Eirnin pushed on quickly before Story could interrupt. "It's not good for the clans to see us in limbo."

"I don't see how it's any of their damn business!"

He just stared at her.

"Well, I don't!" Story took a calming breath before continuing. "This is *our* decision, elf-boy. Not theirs. Besides, don't elves usually take years of courting before they decide to bond? We've only been dating for like six months. I don't see why everyone is so concerned about us."

"They're not concerned about *us*, dear heart. It's *you*." Eirnin's features softened, and he reached for her hand. "You're the Ailesit. Their savior. *Our* savior."

"Don't call me that." Story jerked her hand away, feeling a wave of emotion roll through her. "I didn't do it for *them*. I did it for you. And Eilath and Adair." She scrubbed a hand across her face feeling suddenly exhausted. "And not everyone's happy with me for doing it."

That was an understatement. After she'd restored *The Ailes*, the tree that embodied the source of magic and immortality for the elven race, many of the elves were upset with the results. True, they had magic again after a millennium of darkness, but their immortality had returned in an unexpected manner. Whereas before the Change, elves had been immortal, male elves had been unable to father more than one child. As a result, after the Change, their race had been doomed to a slow extinction.

Until I came along.

By adding her own human blood to the dying *Ailes* tree,

she'd been able to restore it, and with it, the elves' magic. They had not regained their immortality as individuals though, but could now have multiple children, thus preserving and guaranteeing their race's survival.

Eirnin's hand slid around Story's, interrupting her thoughts. He gave her hand three quick squeezes. *I love you.*

Story pressed back four times. *I love you, too.*

Lifting the corner of her mouth in what was meant to be a teasing smile, she peeked at Eirnin out of the corner of her eye. "Besides, this is ridiculous, no one's even popped the question yet."

Eirnin laughed nervously but didn't say anything, leaving Story very confused.

How could I possibly give him a bigger hint? What more does he want? What is he waiting for?

After a few awkward moments Eirnin finally spoke. His words were choppy, disjointed, as if he was searching for the correct words to say. "I'm gone all the time. You're off training with Eínlin. It feels like we've had no time together. I don't want you to feel rushed."

"I don't feel rushed." Story gave him an exasperated look. "Elf-boy, I stayed in this world to be with you. And now you sound like you're not sure you want to be with me—what gives?"

Sputtering, Eirnin jerked back as if slapped. "Not want to be with you! Where in the pits of Aisdean did that come from?" He shook his head. "Are you mad? I'm in love with you Story Melissa of the Sorenson clan. I can't imagine not spending the rest of time with you."

"Then what's the problem?"

"There is no problem!"

"Then why haven't you asked me to marry you yet?"

"Why haven't I?" He stared at her for a few breaths, his eyes fading from yellow, to orange. Then he laughed.

“Bond with you, whatever! You know what I mean.” Story fisted her hands on her hips and furrowed her brow. “I don’t get what’s so funny, Eirnin. Why is everything always a joke to you?”

Composing himself, Eirnin quirked an eyebrow. “You know, Story, for someone who is so very intelligent, you sometimes miss the most obvious things.”

“So, now you’re gonna insult me? Awesome.” Pushing past him, Story tried to storm off, but Eirnin grabbed her arm and pulled her tight to him.

The world seemed to slow as she gazed into his expressive eyes. He reached up and tucked a stray braid behind her ear, his callused fingertip lingering a bit on her uniquely rounded outer ear. Story wanted to close the remaining few inches that separated their lips and forget this entire conversation. She wished she’d never brought it up; it was clear he needed more time, and she wasn’t going to push him for a proposal.

He’ll ask me when he’s ready.

But Eirnin had other ideas. “Why do you expect *me* to ask *you* to bond with me?”

Story’s eyebrows shot up to her hairline. That was the last question she’d expected from him. “You mean instead of the other way around? As in me ask you?”

“Aye.” His finger traced down from the tip of her ear to her jaw, and Story found it hard to concentrate on the conversation.

“Because I... because you’re...”

“Because I’m the male in our relationship?” Eirnin’s finger ran along the contour of her neck before settling on her bare, sun-warmed shoulder.

“Yeah.” Her eyes were half-closed as she enjoyed the feeling of his touch. It always made her feel so warm and happy, even when they were arguing.

“Do you think perhaps it is your human culture that brought

you up to think like that? From what you've told me, you grew up in a somewhat male-dominated, patriarchal society."

"Yeah, but—"

"And Elves are..." Eirnin dropped his hands to his side and gazed at her, swirls of orange and purple flooding his irises.

Story stared into his eyes for a few moments, confused and not fully comprehending what he was trying to get at, until it hit her, and she gasped.

"Matriarchal!" *How could I be this clueless?* She placed her hands on either side of the elf's face. "Eirnin of the Eáchan clan, will you marry me?"

Story could see the relief wash over him as his face broke into a wide smile.

"Dear heart, I thought you'd never ask."

Closing the gap between them, Eirnin pulled Story into a deep kiss, one that she could feel all the way to the tips of her toes. At nearly the same height, it was easy for her to wrap her arms around his neck and pull him in closer. She buried her fingers in his damp hair and eagerly returned his kiss, never wanting this moment to end.

Ped, forgotten until now, whined and nudged Eirnin's shoulder. He pushed the selkie away before returning his hand to Story's hip and reclaiming her lips with his.

Thrusting his long snout between them, Ped barked loudly, and Story giggled, despite the selkie's interruption. She was too giddy over their engagement to be irritated. "I told you he didn't like—"

The sound of someone clearing his throat erupted from behind Ped.

Story fought the urge to break away from Eirnin as he fractionally tightened his hold on her.

"Whoever it is will have to learn to deal with the idea of *us*. Especially now," he murmured in her ear. Turning toward

the sound of their intruder, he frowned, probably over the fact that he'd been caught off guard. The person had approached so stealthily Eirnin hadn't noticed them, despite Ped's obvious agitation.

"Easy for you to say," she whispered back, though she knew whoever it was could probably still hear her anyway—she often envied the elves and their super hearing. "You're not viewed as a catastrophe by half your race." Plus there was the cultural taboo against elves courting anyone outside their race—a taboo that should have been lifted once she'd restored the source of their life and magic. Then again, a thousand-year-old culture born of fear of extinction did not change its attitudes overnight.

"Aye, you've a point there. Still..." Eirnin raised his voice. "Oi! Whoever it is, make yourself known or go away. We don't have time for nonsense. And if you're just here to say something nasty to the Ailesit, you can go away now as well."

A thin, rangy-looking, young elf, with muddy brown hair cut short in the fashion of the hunting clan, stepped tentatively around Ped, giving the selkie a wide berth. The elf was taller than Eirnin, but then most elves were. He wore the standard hunter garb, neutral browns and greens for his trousers and jerkin to blend in with the surrounding woods, suede boots, and a quiver full of arrows alongside an elegant, composite wood bow strapped to his back. His black, Egyptian-looking, triangular ail-lach marked him as a member of the same clan as Eirnin.

She recognized the elf as Eirus, Eáchan's young apprentice. The first time she'd met Eirus had been several months ago in her quarters, when Eáchan had barged in to inform Story that as Eirnin's clan leader she was forbidding the two of them to court or bond. That had not endeared Eáchan to Story, and their frequent encounters following that episode had not been any more cordial.

Meanwhile, Eirnin had simply received permission to

court Story from the queen instead, though Story knew he'd have flouted elf tradition and courted her regardless. That made her smile slightly before she focused her attention back on the young elf.

Eisrus inclined his head deeply toward Story with reverence and awe.

Well, at least he doesn't hate me...

"Ailesit." He then turned toward Eirnin and bowed his head respectfully, less than he had for Story, but more than he should have for a normal hunter of his clan.

"Eirnin." Eisrus stressed the 'i', and Eirnin's eyebrows shot up to his hairline while his face blanched. "Eachan requests your presence at the clan hall for the formal passing of the bow."

Story could only assume he meant the iron-tipped bow that was the mantle of the hunting chief's office.

Wait a sec...

Her jaw dropped open as her brain caught up with the conversation. Had Eirnin just become the new leader of the hunting clan?



CHAPTER TWO

TROUBLE

FROWNING, STORY EYED HERSELF IN THE FULL-LENGTH MIRROR in Eírnin's spare bedroom. She was lucky that Almera had gifted him the full-length silver and green sarong that Story was borrowing—she'd been concerned he'd only have skimpy ones, and by the orange gleam in his eye, she could tell he was tempted to say as much.

I need to remember to keep some clothes here for emergencies like this. Then she smiled to herself; soon enough, all her clothes would be here for good. *And I won't be changing in the spare room!* She adjusted her sarong one more time and frowned again. *Well, it'll have to do.*

Showing up to a formal hunting clan dinner in dryad clothing would only inflame the already sour feelings between her and Eachan—as if Story was trying to flaunt the fact that she wasn't an elf.

Closing her eyes, she focused on one of the calming breathing patterns Eínlin, the dreamwalker clan leader, had taught her. *In through the nose for a five count, out through the mouth for ten.* Aside from anxiety over the upcoming ceremony, she was also feeling a surge of irritation. It felt like tonight, yet again,

Eachan was trying to find a way to ruin what little time she had with Éirnin.

Story had spent the majority of their time apart training with Eínlin. After the mage had learned that she was a dream-walker—something Story hadn't even known, but had been doing her whole life by accident—he'd been eager to work with her, developing both her abilities and his own burgeoning skill that had come with the return of the elves' magic. She smiled, thinking about all the dreams she'd had since arriving in Ailionora, dreams she'd unknowingly controlled, at least partially. Happy dreams of her father and siblings, though they had passed on the year before. Dreams with the Faerie Prince, Morigann. Her thoughts soured.

Jerk.

He'd never outright lied to her about the dreams, though he'd led her to believe that he controlled them.

"I will always be in your dreams, so long as you welcome me."

Well, maybe he *had* hinted at her untrained ability.

Still, he tried to kill me. A lot.

And he hadn't been welcome in her dreams since their last encounter, when she'd left him imprisoned in an iron cage in the middle of his own garden, as punishment for his crimes—too many to enumerate, but attempted genocide of the elven race was reason enough.

Her thoughts were interrupted as a familiar knock sounded on the door. Aside from the fact that Éirnin lived alone, as most elves who were unbonded did, she'd recognize his knock anywhere. He popped his head inside, eyes closed, and she laughed at the familiar gesture, her mood instantly improving. "I'm decent. You can open your eyes."

He stepped the rest of the way in, crossed the wooden floor, made smooth by centuries of feet shuffling across it, and took her into his arms. "You are never decent." He kissed her on

the nose. Story leaned in to kiss his mouth, but he pulled away quickly. "Ah, ah. None of that, dear heart. We're already late as it is."

She frowned at the sight of his formal wear. It wasn't much different from everyday hunter clothing, just more layers and long sleeves that covered up his beautiful tattoos—layers that were stifling in the late summer heat as the sweat beading on his forehead attested to.

Eírnin looked at her, yellow hints of concern in his eyes. "You don't have to go if you don't want to."

Sighing, she pulled his arms from around her back before tucking his hand firmly in hers. "No, they need to get used to me. To know that I'm not going anywhere."

She tugged him out of the wood paneled room, down the narrow, plastered hall, past sparsely decorated living rooms that hadn't changed since Eírnin's parents had died decades before. Hand in hand, trailed by Ped, they followed the cobblestone streets toward the clan lodge—which looked more like an ancient stone castle, in her opinion—in the center of the island.

The sun was setting behind the vacant streets, giving the wooden buildings a skeletal cast. Story suppressed a shudder. No matter how often she walked among them, she couldn't get used to the empty homes that lined the streets and canals of every elf island. Centuries ago, they'd been teeming with life; the hunting clan alone had numbered in the thousands. Now, roughly one thousand elves were left in all of Ailionora, divided among the twelve clans.

"You're quiet." Story gave Eírnin a sidelong glance. They still hadn't talked about what had happened, about his new responsibilities. She was curious, but she didn't want to push him. It was all so sudden, but they would have plenty of time to discuss everything, including the details of their engagement,

in private later that evening. If he didn't take the opening she'd given him, that would be just fine.

"Aye." Éirnin raked his fingers through his hair. "I can't get over the results from the vote." He moved his hand down and ran it across the dusting of stubble on his jawline. "We have one every ten years. I voted for Eáchan—sorry, Eachan—again. I assumed everyone else would too. She has led us well before, and with the up-coming war I thought..."

His voice trailed off, so Story took a different tack. "So, does that mean it's the Éirnin clan now?" It felt strange to say his name that way. She repeated it slowly. "Aye-ear-nin."

"Aye, that it does." He let out a deep sigh. "I didn't want this."

"I know." She didn't bother adding that she didn't want it either, and they passed the remainder of their walk in silence.

The roughly quarter-mile trek sped by far too quickly, and soon they were walking up the shallow steps and past the tall archways that lined the outer walls of the massive structure. The heavy main doors were standing open, and they stepped inside, blinking against the bright torches lit all around the great room. Story's gaze swept the space, and she forced her expression to remain neutral as eighty sets of eyes rested their gaze on her and Éirnin.

The entire clan was here, gathered around a long, plain, wooden table, which could have easily sat twenty more elves. Rows of empty tables filled the remaining space on the open floor, and Story's heart filled with sudden sadness as she thought about how close their race had come to dying out, thanks to a petty, vindictive faerie prince. Then she smiled slightly as everyone rose to their feet, and she could see the telltale, bulging abdomens of nearly every bonded female in the clan.

It would take a long time, several generations, but they would repopulate their race. Though, from the few conversations

she'd had with some of the friendlier elves over the past few months, she knew adjusting to the idea of being able to have more than one child, aside from the occasional rare blessing of twins, was difficult—the very concept of cousins, uncles, and aunts, let alone siblings, was foreign to them.

“Éirnin, the clan has assembled.” Eachan’s voice echoed out across the hall, interrupting Story’s thoughts. As one, the hunting clan bowed their heads respectfully toward Éirnin.

Story felt a flush creep up her neck. There was no official protocol where she was concerned, but most elves tended to follow the example of Queen Eánna—meaning, they treated the Ailesit with deference. Story didn’t want to be treated differently, but Eachan’s failure to acknowledge her presence was an obvious slight.

Not that I’m even remotely surprised.

Squeezing Story’s hand three times, Éirnin walked the rest of the way into the room, never letting go of her—his way of flouting the conservative views of his clan regarding public displays of affection. Ped tromped along noisily behind them, and Story held back a smirk.

Éirnin is purposely trying to rile the older ones up.

He stopped at the head of the table, where Eachan stood waiting, holding the hunting clan’s bow.

“Éirnin, the clan has voted. You are now the clan chief.” She held out the bow to him, her eyes liquid silver to Story, but she knew Éirnin could see all the colors of Eachan’s emotions swirling inside.

Éirnin stared at the bow for a few breaths, before reaching out and taking the ancient composite bow with precious iron tips—the only one of its kind—with all the reverence due such an item.

“I accept this responsibility.” He bowed his head toward

his former clan chief. “And can only pray that Ai guides my steps in leading the clan.”

Story’s eyes widened momentarily, and she could see that Eachan’s eyes did the same. Éirnin had surprised them both by invoking the name the elves had given to the Creator. Éirnin had never been much of a believer in all the legends and stories of the past.

Though I’ll bet seeing one legend come true did a lot to change that outlook. She snuck a quick glance at him, and he winked at her. Eachan saw the wink too, and a frown flashed across her features before she composed them once again, and bowing her head, she crossed to stand before the empty chair to Éirnin’s right. As former clan chief, she would serve as Éirnin’s first advisor, especially in the beginning during their turnover period. Story grimaced at the thought of the two elves spending even more time together.

Éirnin stared at the bow in his hands for a moment, as if feeling the weight of his new responsibility. At only sixty-four he was considered very young to be a clan leader—historically, most were well into their two hundreds. In that regard, Eachan, at a hundred and two years old, had been young herself.

The thought made Story smile—if the clan had been open to the idea of breaking tradition by electing a young leader twice in a row, based on their merit and ability, she hoped that showed they were open to accepting all sorts of new changes.

Like me...

She knew Éirnin was nervous, but he didn’t need to be—he was currently the best elf for the job, as Eachan before him had been.

Éirnin let out a quiet breath before turning to face his clan. A gentle breeze blew in through the tall, narrow windows that lined the walls, cooling the stifling room and fluttering the brown and green clan banners. He hung the bow on the back of

his chair, raised his arms in a supplicating gesture, and spoke in a loud, clear voice that carried across the vast hall. "My clan, please, sit. Eat. Talk. We are family."

The elves surrounding the table, left eyes rimmed in identical triangular ailachs, bowed their heads, sat, and began filling the plates before them with the different foods laid out across the table. Story let out a breath she didn't realize she'd been holding, and Ped sat on his haunches, sensing that the tension had passed. Story was pleased things seemed to go so seamlessly, and aside from a few of the younger elves, like Eirus, no one was staring at her any longer.

The only problem she now faced was Story didn't know where to sit. She wasn't even an elf, much less a member of the hunter clan, and she didn't want to upset things more than she already had.

Before she could say anything to try to excuse herself from the meal, Éirnin motioned to the elf on his left, Eilantos, the clan leader who had preceded Eachan.

"Could we get a chair for the Ailesit, second advisor?"

Eilantos nodded his head and, without hesitation, brought a beautifully carved wooden chair from a nearby table over for Story. He seemed unsure of where to put it, so Éirnin took it from him with a smile.

"We'll just set it here next to mine." Suiting action to words, he placed the chair to the right of his at the head of the table. A hush settled on the table as everyone stopped eating and talking and turned to stare, yet again. Story sat down in her chair and kept her eyes firmly fixed on the empty space before it, while Éirnin motioned for a place setting to be brought over for her.

I'm going to kill him later.

He knew she hated this—hated breaking "rules" of any sort. But she knew he was right: some things, some traditions,

needed to be rocked. And besides, they had voted for him. They had to know she was part of the deal.

Out of the corner of her eye, she saw Eilantos looking at her. He winked, then began scooping wild fowl and a breaded mixture that reminded Story a bit of Thanksgiving dressing onto his plate. Eírnin sat down and followed suit. The rest of the clan resumed their soft conversations and feasting.

Eírnin handed her a large plate overflowing with food. "Don't worry, dear heart, there's plenty more where that came from. I imagine we'll *just* manage to keep you satisfied."

The tension in Story's shoulders eased. "Look, how many times do I have to tell you? Humans need a lot of food. You guys are the ones with the freakishly slow metabolisms." Taking up her wooden chopsticks, she picked up something that reminded her of broccoli, both in smell and appearance, and crunched down on it.

Delicious!

Eilantos smiled and took a sip from his wine glass. "I've heard of your appetite, Ailesit. I had thought it was just an exaggeration the dreamwalkers had come up with to make you seem even more mysterious."

"Please, call me Story." She took another bite of not-broccoli, and after swallowing continued, "And I do eat a lot. But I swear it's normal for a human. Especially an eighteen year old."

Eilantos's eyebrows rose at that. "I didn't realize you were so young. Still an apprentice's age. Still a child like my Eirus."

Eachan passed Eírnin a glass of wine and then sat down again, staring sullenly at her empty plate. Eírnin looked at her, almost pleadingly, and she picked up her own wine glass and took a deep swallow, pointedly ignoring the conversation. Eírnin's mouth tightened fractionally, and Story saw a quick flash of red in his eyes before he turned to Eilantos and resumed

the thread of the previous conversation. "In her human culture, she would be considered an adult."

Story quickly clarified, "In all fairness, that's because we tend to live only one century, as opposed to your typical three."

"But you are half-dryad," Eilantos pressed.

"Yeah, I am. So I don't really know what that's gonna do to my lifespan, especially now that I'm tied to *The Ailes*, but I imagine I'll live a lot longer than a typical human." She shrugged, not really wanting to pursue the topic any further.

He seemed to pick up on her reluctance and changed the subject. "Have you enjoyed your time with the mages? If I've heard rightly, you're a dreamwalker, or at least studying to be one?"

Story noticed that the elves seated near their end of the table had mostly abandoned their food and were focused on her conversation with Eilantos. She set down her chopsticks and reached for her drink in order to buy some time to consider her answer. As she drank, she focused her eyes on Eilantos, and much to her surprise, she could just make out the orange sparks of curiosity and excitement in them. She was honored he'd decided to let her in so quickly. If he would trust her with his emotions, she would trust him in return.

"I guess, yes. Eínlin's been monopolizing my time. We've been trying to learn from each other. My experience and his clan's knowledge. We've come a long way. But it's nearly winter, and there's still so much left to learn..." She let out a sigh, feeling once again overwhelmed.

Taking a sip of wine, Eírnin turned toward Story. He opened his mouth as if to say something, when his fingers began to spasm around the glass, shattering it. Silver blood seeped from his hand where the glass cut into his skin, and his body began to convulse.

"Eírnin? *Eírnin?*" She grabbed his hand and tried to focus

him, to get his attention. He continued to shake, his entire body seizing. Eilantos was out of his seat and at Éirnin's side before Story could blink. He pulled Éirnin out of the chair so violently it fell over with a loud crash. Eilantos lowered Éirnin to the floor gently, cradling his clan leader's head.

"Stay back!" he ordered the sudden rush of elves coming to aid or just look. From the corner of her eye, Story saw hands restrain Ped as he tried to reach his master, howling.

Story fell to her knees next to Éirnin, holding one shaking hand, trying not to get in anyone's way, but at the same time refusing to let go of him. Eilantos barked orders at the elves hovering around. She vaguely heard the healing mages being sent for, but her sole focus was Éirnin. She watched helplessly as his eyes rolled back into his head, and white foam formed at the corners of his mouth.

This can't be happening! I can't lose him. I can't!

Éirnin's body went rigid, and his back bowed up as if tugged toward the ceiling by an invisible string. She felt his hand tighten around hers.

Once. *I.*

Twice. *Love.*

And then... nothing.



CHAPTER THREE

WHO KNEW

HE'S NOT DEAD. AT LEAST, NOT YET." ÉICETAN'S ROLLING accent, so cruelly similar to Éirnin's, struck Story as incongruous with the Polynesian vibe she always got from his clan's appearance. It also struck her as odd that she would focus on something so insignificant when Éirnin lay, unmoving, on a pile of woven mats on the floor of the Healer's home.

If she'd been asked, Story couldn't say how they arrived on the healing clan's island. It had all been surreal, like a dream. Éirnin, healthy one minute, and then seizing violently the next. And now, thankfully, breathing—if irregularly—but also comatose. Lost to the world. She had yet to relinquish his limp hand, afraid that if she did, whatever tenuous link he still had to this life would be lost.

I can't lose you too. I wouldn't survive it.

Éicetan leaned over Éirnin once again, his ailach—five thin, black stripes that ran from forehead to jaw over his left eye—almost lost in the thousands of black tattoos that covered nearly his entire body. Where Éirnin's tattoos had spiraled fluidly around his left arm and shoulder following the trail of scars a mountain troll had left there, Éicetan's tattoos followed no

pattern that Story could discern. They covered his arms, neck, chest, and legs in a series of closely drawn, thin, black lines and geometric shapes.

That had to have taken years.

She was drawn from her introspection when Eícetan sat back and fingered one of the thick wooden plugs in his earlobes. "Aye, I'll need to confirm it with the other mages, Eilantos." He nodded toward the hunter standing in the doorway of the straw roofed hut. "But I stand by it. He's mostly dead. I don't know how much longer he's got. Or what's keeping him here." He looked at Story and shrugged helplessly. "There's still so much we don't know about magic. We have centuries of lore and studies, but only a few months of practical application."

Story bit the inside of her mouth and fought the desire to reach across and rip the wooden plugs from his ears. She wanted answers not excuses, dammit!

Feeling the heat from Story's gaze, Eícetan stood quickly, nearly tripping over the calf-length cotton wrap which served as his only clothing. "Ailesit, I mean no disrespect. I just don't know what caused this."

"I think I do." A female voice, with the same dialect as Eírnin's, broke in.

Story did not look up. She refused to acknowledge the speaker. Of course it would be *her*.

The speaker continued, "This acorn was found among the remains of his glass." Her arm and hand moved into Story's view, as if to separate Story from Eírnin, and Story had to force herself not to swat it away.

The hand opened, revealing a tiny, insignificant acorn resting in its palm. "This was the work of the fey."

Finally, Story looked up.

Eachan.

Something inside Story snapped as all her anger,

helplessness, fear, and frustration found an available target. A primal scream tore from her throat, and Story dropped her hold on Eírnin's hand, launching herself at the former clan leader. Her hands were out, fingers curled, intending to scratch, bite, maim, punch, and most importantly hurt the stronger elf as much as she could.

"Get out!" Story grabbed a handful of the elf's short black hair and tugged, jerking Eachan against the thatch wall of the hut. "You're not wanted!" She shoved the elf hard, and Eachan just stared at her, her eyes blank silver pools, showing no emotion.

"Ailesit, you need to stop!" Eilantos's strong hands pulled her away, but she squirmed out of them and ran at Eachan again. She tackled the elf with the full force of her body behind her shoulder and hurled them both through the thin weave of the wall. They landed on the unyielding dirt outside with a thud, and Eachan's breath escaped in an audible whoosh as Story crashed down on her chest. Eachan did nothing to dislodge Story, nor block the attack she was raging.

Story raised a fist and punched the elf in the eye. "Defend yourself!"

Eachan did nothing.

Story punched her again, in the nose this time, feeling her own knuckles split, her crimson blood mixing with the elf's silver. "Fight me, you bitch!"

Several sets of heavily tattooed hands yanked her unceremoniously off the prone, bleeding elf, holding her upright between them. Eícetan stood over Story, chanting and weaving his hands through the air in a complex pattern.

"Let me go!" Story pulled against her captors, squirming and tugging, but to no avail. "I'm going to kill her!"

Eícetan extended his hand, and she could see the silver sparks of magic jumping between his fingertips as he reached for her face.

“No!” She jerked her head as far away from him as she could, her braids whipping across her face. “No! No! No!”

His hand made contact with her forehead, and she felt her body go limp. Eachan finally sat up, wiping at the blood dripping from her nose, leaving a silver smear across her cheek. Her face was still an emotionless mask, but the tears streaming down her cheeks betrayed some feeling at last.

Eícetan dragged two fingers down slowly as he closed Story’s eyes. “Sleep, Ailesit. Sleep.”

And so she did.



Story opened her eyes to find she was no longer in Eícetan’s hut. A wave of panic swept over her as she took in the perfect circle of oak trees around her and the solitary, rough-hewn, stone throne in the center of the clearing. She was in a faerie ring, and worse than that, she was dreaming.

Ever since learning from Eínlin that the vivid dreams she’d had her entire life were actually born from being an untrained dreamwalker, she’d been learning to control her dreams and the places she visited in them. Showing up in the midst of a faerie ring was generally bad. Showing up by some means outside her own was flat out dangerous. She reached for her knife, and of course, it wasn’t there. Her hair was unchanged though, and she was still wearing her borrowed sarong.

At least I still have control over my appearance.

Taking a deep breath, she banished the grief over Eírnin’s condition which threatened to overwhelm her, tucking it away for later. She had to focus now, or risk getting bespelled, as she had the first time she’d unwittingly visited a faerie ring.

"I did not bring you here to hurt you, Ailesit." The voice, feminine and airy, like the fluttering of leaves in the wind, swirled in the air around Story, coming from all the trees around her at once.

Story whirled, not wanting to leave her back open for attack. The fey couldn't lie, but they were very adept at telling half-truths and not-lies. "Show yourself!"

All she received in response was silence. A light breeze flittered through the grove, sending out a swirl of fallen leaves, just now beginning to change colors.

"I said show yourself!"

A long moment passed, and then a soft crackling sounded from her right. Story quickly turned to face it. A tree slowly emerged from behind a tall oak and glided forward across the ground, its roots undulating over the mossy surface beneath it.

No, not a tree... a woman!

Story's eyes widened. Very tall, nearly seven feet, the tree woman's thick roots twisted up out of the ground around each other to form a trunk that narrowed and widened, following the lines and form of a traditional human female's shape. Thighs, hips, and breasts, all covered in oak bark, almost as if it were just a dress covering the woman beneath. As for the woman, as hard and unyielding as her trunk was, her arms, hands, neck, shoulders, and face were soft and smooth like human or elf skin, almost belying the madness that shone from her solidly white eyes.

She glided to a stop in front of Story and raised her delicate arms as if to say "here I am." Now that she was closer, Story could see the faint outlines of an oak leaf pattern across the surface of her skin. Her red-gold hair streamed out around her face, wild and unkempt, with what Story thought were a few branches and twigs stuck in it. When they moved of their own

accord, against the light breeze, she realized they were a part of the tree lady.

“Who are you? Why did you bring me here?” Story eyed her warily, knowing better than to trust a fey. She suspected, based on the very powerful vibe coming from this one, that she was one of the sidhe—masters of the lesser faeries. She’d only met two, before now, and had no desire to encounter another. They were the most dangerous creatures of Ailionora, and that was saying something in world filled with trolls, kraken, and other unknown terrors.

Her host smiled, her features lighting up in beauty, and Story suddenly felt the desire to curl up at the lady’s roots for a nap.

Story gave her head a quick shake. “None of that! Or, so help me, I’ll come back here in the real world and torch this place when I wake up.” She stepped away, backing into the solid trunk of an oak. It was an empty threat, and they both knew it, but Story was not about to stand there and let herself fall under another faerie spell. She’d nearly died the last time. If not for Éirnin... *Don’t think about him right now!*

The tree lady’s smile softened to just a quirk of her lips at the corner, and she moved to the stone throne in the center of the clearing. Her trunk bent effortlessly at what would have been the knees and hips of a human, and she sat.

“You have nothing to fear from me, Ailesit.” With a fingertip, she traced one of the unfamiliar symbols carved into the throne’s armrests. “At least, not for now.” Her voice was cultured and refined, much like Morrigann’s had been, though hers had a wilder air to it.

Story narrowed her eyes, but didn’t say anything. She would not react to threats, no matter how veiled they were, and the faerie had brought her here, so clearly she wanted to talk. Story would not humor her by acting interested.

"I am called the Autumn Princess by mortals. Though, in truth, I have not been called by any name for nearly a thousand years." Her hands tightened on her armrests slightly. "You may call me Metirreonn."

Story raised an eyebrow. "Why would I want to call you anything? I don't really see us being friends."

Metirreonn pursed her lips in annoyance, and her solid white eyes stared unblinkingly at Story.

That's creepy. Don't antagonize the crazy tree lady, Story.

As much as she wanted to lash out, Story checked herself. The sidhe had brought her here for a reason, and she'd be an idiot not to find out why.

"Fine, Metirreonn, what do you want?" She crossed her arms, trying to act nonchalant.

"I believe you know my brother, the Spring Prince."

"Morrigann?" Story dropped her arms to her side in surprise. "Don't you mean the Faerie Prince?" She felt her frown deepen at the memory of that particular faerie. So much loss and pain could be laid at his feet.

The Autumn Princess snorted and somehow managed to make that sound lovely and delicate, like a whistling wind through the trees. "This is what comes from the rest of us being locked away for so long." She drummed her fingers on the armrest. "No, Ailesit, he is the *Spring* Prince. My brother does not rule all the fey, but clearly would have you believe he did. So typical." Then she smiled again, only this time it sent a chill up Story's spine as the tree spirit locked her milky-white eyes with Story's sea-green ones. "Though you have bound him quite effectively in that iron cage. Indeed, none of us, his kin, can release him. Well done, Ailesit. Well done."

"You didn't bring me here to congratulate me." Story felt her skin grow cold. *Morrigann's sister? Which means she's just as*

dangerous. Then she remembered her encounter with the Summer Queen, their mother. *If not more dangerous!*

“You are right. I did not.” Metirreonn stilled her fingers. “Spring has something of mine; he knows what it is.” She smiled coldly. “I need you to bring it to me.”

“And why would I do that?”

A branch from the sidhe’s hair glided out in front of her, bearing a single, small acorn. “Because I poisoned Eírnin.”

One of the tattoos on her shoulder coalesced into a live oak leaf, and she plucked it before standing up and holding it out toward Story. “And if you want the antidote, you will bring me what I seek.”

Story lunged for the leaf, but the Autumn Princess was too quick and crushed it in her hand. “You have until Winter’s first frost reaches him. Then, he dies.”

Without waiting for a response, Metirreonn disappeared in a scattering of red-gold leaves and sparks.



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About the Author

Janine K. Spendlove is a KC-130 pilot in the United States Marine Corps. Her bestselling first novel, *War of the Seasons, Book One: The Human*, was published in June 2011, and she's also had several short stories published in various anthologies. A graduate from Brigham Young University in 1999 with a BA in History Teaching, she is an avid runner, enjoys knitting, playing Beatles tunes on her guitar, and spending time with her family. She currently resides with her husband and daughter in Washington, DC. She is currently at work on her next novel.